

3

The Constitutional Monarchy: Reforming France 1789-92

POINTS TO CONSIDER

Following the overthrow of the *ancien régime* (Chapter 2) the main aim of the assembly was to reform France. This would involve changing the country's institutions and restructuring the way in which it was governed. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen provided some of the guiding principles which underpinned these reforms. This chapter will consider three important themes:

- The reform programmes undertaken by the National Assembly to consolidate the Revolution, and the extent to which they changed France
- The rise of the Jacobins and the Cordeliers and their impact on political life
- The emergence of the republican movement

Key dates

1789	November 2	Nationalisation of Church property
1790	May 21	Creation of the Paris Sections
	July 12	Civil Constitution of the Clergy
	August 16	Reorganisation of the judiciary
1791	March 2	Dissolution of Guilds
	June 14	The Le Chapelier Law
	June 20	Flight to Varennes
	July 17	Champ de Mars massacre
	September 14	Louis XVI accepts the new constitution
	November 9	Decree against <i>émigrés</i> (vetoed by Louis on 12 November)
1792	March	Guillotine to be used for all public executions
	May 27	New decree against Refractory Priests
1793	July 17	Final abolition of Feudalism in France

Key question
What principles underlay the new political system?

1 | The Reform Programmes of the National Assembly

A significant start had been made to reforming France by the end of 1789. The feudal system had been abolished by the August Decrees (see page 40) and the ground had been prepared for the creation of a constitution. Following this, the deputies drew up the principles on which this should be based – the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (see page 42). It condemned the practices of the *ancien régime* and outlined the rights of citizens, as demanded in the *cahiers* of all three orders.

After October 1789, most French people believed that the Revolution was over. For the next year there was broad agreement amongst the different groups in the Assembly, as they set about reorganising how France was governed, its legal system and the finances, taxes and economy of the country.

In doing this they tried to apply the principles of the Declaration of Rights to give France a uniform, **decentralised**, representative and humanitarian system which treated people equally and with dignity. Many of the deputies regarded themselves as products of the Enlightenment, and as such sought to end cruelty, superstition and poverty. Most people by the end of 1789 wanted a **constitutional monarchy**, and there were few regrets about the passing of the *ancien régime*. France was fundamentally changed in many ways. New structures, such as the **departments**, were created that have survived until the present day.

The deputies in the National Assembly set about their task of reforming France with considerable dedication. While most people waited in anticipation for reforms which they hoped would improve their lives, many in the privileged classes prepared themselves for the worse. The main areas where changes would be made were:

- local government
- taxation and finance
- the economy
- the legal system
- the Church
- the constitution.

Local government

The reforms to local government involved significantly restructuring it. In restructuring local government the deputies wanted to make sure that power was decentralised, passing from the central government in Paris to the local authorities. This would make it much more difficult for the King to recover the power he had held before the Revolution. It was hoped that the administrative chaos of the *ancien régime* would be replaced by a coherent structure. The Assembly also wanted to ensure that the principle of democracy was introduced to all levels – whereby

Key terms

Decentralised

Where decision making is devolved from the centre to the regions of a country.

Constitutional monarchy

Where the powers of the Crown are limited by a constitution. Also known as a limited monarchy.

Departments

On 26 February 1790, 83 new divisions for local administration in France were created to replace the old divisions of the *ancien régime*.

Key question
How far did the reforms to local government reflect the principles of the Assembly?

officials would be elected and would be responsible to those who elected them.

By decrees of December 1789 and February 1790 France was divided into 83 departments, which were subdivided into 547 districts and 43,360 **communes** (or municipalities). Communes were grouped into **cantons**, where **primary assemblies** for elections were held and justices of the peace had their courts. All these administrative divisions, except the cantons, were run by elected councils. There were also changes in Paris. On 21 May 1790 the Constituent Assembly passed a decree which reorganised the local government of the city into 48 Sections.

The right to vote

The reforms which revealed the real intention of the Assembly related to voting qualifications. It became clear that deputies did not intend that those who had taken part in the popular protests should have a direct role in government. A law in December 1789 introduced the concept of '**active citizens**', of which there were three tiers:

1. Men over 25 who paid the equivalent of three days' labour in local taxes. It was estimated in 1790 that almost 4.3 million Frenchmen fell into this category. Citizens who did not pay this amount in taxes had no vote and were known as '**passive citizens**'. In reality the only thing active citizens could do was to choose electors – the second tier.
2. Electors – active citizens who paid the equivalent of 10 days' labour in local taxes. About 50,000 men met this qualification and they elected members of the canton and department assemblies and could become officials there. They also elected the deputies to the National Assembly – the third tier.
3. To be eligible to become a deputy in the National Assembly an 'active citizen' had to pay at least a *marc d'argent* (a silver mark), the equivalent to 54 days' manual labour, in direct taxation. This was way beyond the reach of most Frenchmen.

The electoral system was, therefore, heavily weighted in favour of the wealthy, although 61 per cent of Frenchmen had the right to take part in some elections (in England only four per cent of adult males had the vote). At local level, most peasants had the right to vote and were qualified to stand for office. This amounted to an administrative revolution. Before 1789 government officials ran the provincial administration, where there was not one elected council. In 1790 there were no government officials at the local level: elected councils had totally replaced them.

Control of the new councils

In the south, bourgeois landowners controlled the new councils. In the north, the bourgeoisie was largely urban and took office in the towns, which left the rural communes in the hands of

The administrative structure of Paris was reorganised into 48 Sections. These Sections became the power base of the *sans-culottes* until they were swept away in October 1795: 21 May 1790

Key date

Commune

The smallest administrative unit in France.

Canton

An administrative subdivision of a department.

Primary assemblies

Meeting places for voters.

Active citizens

Citizens who, depending on the amount of taxes paid, could vote and stand as deputies.

Passive citizens

Approximately 2.7 million citizens who enjoyed the civic rights provided by the Declaration of the Rights of Man, but paid insufficient taxes to qualify for a vote.

Key terms

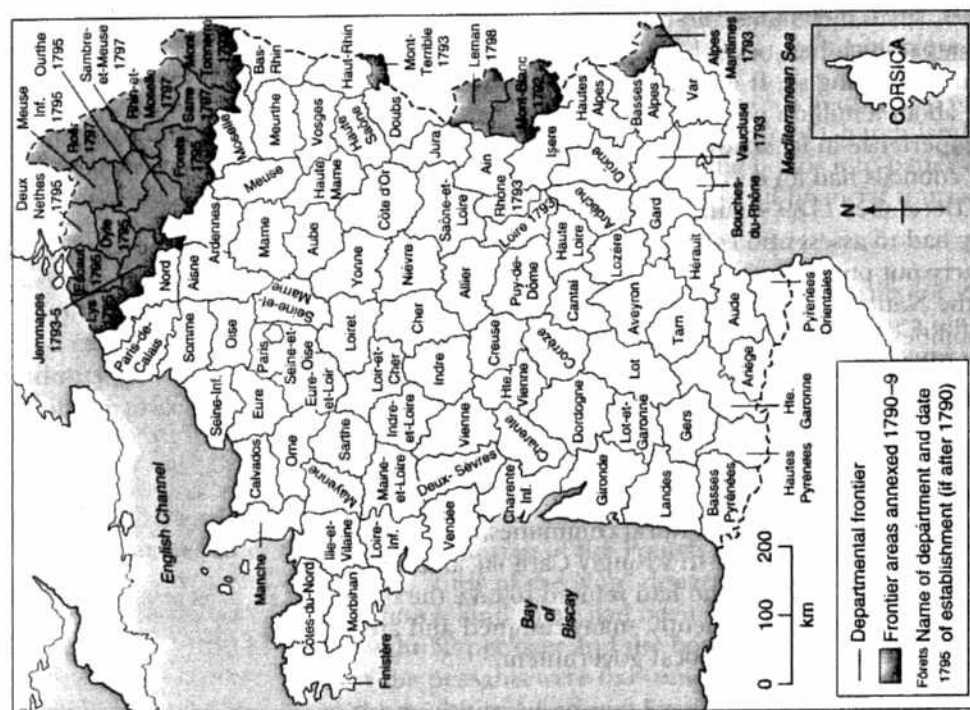


Figure 3.1: Local government: (a) Old France – the provinces of *ancien régime* France. (b) New France – the departmental framework 1790–9. Look closely at both maps. How do you think that people would have benefited from the reorganisation that took place?

laboureurs, small merchants and artisans. People belonging to social groups which had never held any public office now had the opportunity of doing so. It is estimated that in the decade 1789–99 about a million people were elected to councils and gained experience in local administration.

These councils had an enormous burden of work thrust upon them in December 1789 – much more than the *cahiers* had asked for. They had to assess and collect direct taxes, maintain law and order, carry out public works, see to the upkeep of churches and control the National Guard. Later legislation added to their responsibilities: they had to administer the clerical oath of loyalty, register births, marriages and deaths, requisition grain, and keep a watch on people suspected of opposing the Revolution.

In the towns there was usually an adequate supply of literate, talented people who provided a competent administration. It was often impossible, however, in the villages, to fill the councils with men who could read and write. Rural communes, therefore, often carried out their duties badly. In strongly Catholic areas officials disliked persecuting priests who had refused to take the oath of loyalty (see page 60). Consequently, many resigned and areas were left without any effective local government.

Taxation and finance

After the royal administration collapsed in 1789 very few taxes were collected. The Assembly needed money quickly, particularly when it decided that venal office-holders should be compensated for the loss of their offices. Yet a new tax system could not be set up immediately as considerable planning would be required before any new systems could be created.

It was decided that the existing system of direct and indirect taxation should continue until 1791. This was very unpopular. People wanted the demands made in the *cahiers* to be met at once. When there were outbreaks of violence in Picardy, one of the most heavily taxed areas under the *ancien régime*, the government gave way. The *gabelle* was abolished in March 1790 and within a year nearly all the unpopular indirect taxes, except for external customs duties, were also abolished.

The sale of Church land

As a first step to dealing with the financial crisis, Church land was nationalised on 2 November 1789 and *assignats* were introduced. The National Assembly had three main reasons for selling Church land:

1. To provide money for the State in the period before the new and fairer taxation system was introduced.
2. To guarantee the success of the Revolution since those who bought Church lands would have a vested interest in maintaining the revolutionary changes, and would be more likely to oppose a restoration of the *ancien régime*, which might lead to the Church recovering its land.

Laboureurs

The upper level of the peasantry who owned a plough and hired labour to work their land.

Key term

Key question

What was the National Assembly hoping to achieve by selling Church land?

Key terms

Biens nationaux

The nationalised property of the Church as ordered by the decree of 2 November 1789.

State monopoly

A system whereby the State exercises total control over an industry and can set whatever price it wishes.

Tax rolls

Lists of citizens who had to pay taxes to the State.

Key question

Was the new taxation system better than the old?

3. It was also hoped that the clergy would support the new regime, as they would be dependent on it for their salaries.

The government would issue bonds, known as *assignats*, which the public could buy and use for the purchase of Church lands. In April 1790 the Assembly converted the bonds into paper money, which could be used like bank notes in all financial transactions.

Buying Church land

Sales of land in 1791–2 were brisk. In Haute-Marne, for example, nearly 39,000 hectares of Church land, representing a tenth of the arable land in the department, were sold. The main beneficiaries were the bourgeoisie, as they had the ready cash. This was necessary because the *biens nationaux* were sold off in large plots. Members of the bourgeoisie bought most of the available land near the towns. Peasants fared better away from the towns.

A leading historian of the French Revolution, George Lefebvre, in a special study of the Nord department, found that 25 per cent of the Church land there had been sold by 1799: of this peasants had bought 52 per cent and the bourgeoisie 48 per cent. About a third of the peasants were first-time owners, so land did not only go to the wealthier *laboureurs*. Even where the bourgeoisie bought most of the land, they often resold it in smaller quantities to the peasants. It is estimated that the number of peasant smallholders increased by a million between 1789 and 1810.

Reforming the taxation system

Before the reforms were introduced the assembly abolished:

- indirect taxes – *aides, traites, octrois, gabelle* (see page 5)
- the **state monopoly** on growing, distributing and selling tobacco
- the old direct taxes – *taille*, capitation, *vingtièmes*
- tax farming.

The new financial system, which came into effect in January 1791, established three new direct taxes:

1. The *contribution foncière* – a land tax from which there were no exemptions or special privileges.
2. The *contribution mobilière* – a tax on movable goods such as grain payable by active citizens.
3. The *patente* – a tax on commercial profits.

In line with the principle of equality, citizens would pay according to their ability to do so. It was planned that the new taxes would be collected by the municipal councils.

This system might have worked well if there had been a systematic valuation of the land, but for this a large number of officials were needed. The Assembly would not provide them, as they would cost too much. Consequently, a survey of land values was not begun until 1807 and was not completed until the 1830s. Meanwhile, the new **tax rolls** were based on those of the *ancien régime*, so that great regional variations remained. People in the

Seine-et-Marne department, for example, paid five times as much in taxes as those in the Ariège. It was also easier to avoid paying direct taxes than indirect ones, since it was easier to conceal incomes than goods.

However, the new system did benefit the poor, as the burden of taxation fell on producers rather than consumers, with the abolition of indirect taxes. It was a fairer system, as all property and income was to be taxed on the same basis. There would no longer be any special privileges or exemptions. Citizens would pay according to their means. The new financial structure would in the main last throughout the nineteenth century.

Economic reforms

During the *ancien régime* many commentators noted how limited French economic progress was when compared with the rapid developments taking place across the Channel in Britain. They viewed the restrictive social structures and internal barriers as inhibiting economic development. The Revolution presented opportunities for reform. All the deputies in the Constituent Assembly believed in *laissez-faire*. Therefore, they introduced **free trade** in grain in August 1789 and removed price controls. These measures were extended to other products in 1790–1, though this is not what the people as a whole desired. They wanted the price and distribution of all essential goods to be controlled, in order to avoid scarcity, high prices and possible starvation.

In October 1790 internal tariffs were abolished, so a national market was created for the first time. For the first time goods could move freely from one part of France to another without having to pay internal customs duties. This was helped by the creation of a single system of weights and measures – the decimal system – which applied to the whole of France.

Employer/worker relations

The deputies were determined to get rid of any organisations which had special privileges and restrictions regarding employment. The aim was to open up a range of crafts and occupations to more people. Guilds were, therefore, abolished in 1791, as they had restricted the entry of people into certain trades in order to ensure that wage levels and prices charged for goods and services had remained high.

In June 1791 a coalition of 80,000 Parisian workers was threatening a general strike to obtain higher wages, so the Assembly passed the Le Chapelier law, named after the deputy who proposed it, which forbade trade unions and employers' organisations. **Collective bargaining, picketing** and strikes were declared illegal. No-one in the Assembly objected to the measure. Strikes remained illegal until 1864. The ban on trade unions was not lifted until 1884.

Key question

What was the underlying aim of the economic reforms?

Laissez-faire

Non-interference in economic matters, so that trade and industry should be free from state interference.

Free trade

Trade without the imposition of taxes and duties on the goods.

Collective bargaining

Where a trade union negotiates with employers on behalf of workers who are members.

Picketing

The practice of strikers trying to get others to join in.

The assembly passes the Le Chapelier Law which outlawed trade unions and strikes:
14 June 1791

Key terms

Key dates

Key date

Key term

The poor and needy

The Assembly regarded relief for the poor as a duty of the State. The Church had provided what little assistance the poor had received but it could do so no longer when its land was sold and it lost its main sources of income. Therefore, there was an urgent need for a national organisation, financed by taxation, to take over this role. The Assembly set up a committee which, in 1791, showed for the first time just how serious the problem was. It concluded that nearly two million people could support themselves only by begging. When it came to taking practical measures to help the poor, the committee found itself impotent. There was simply not enough money available to deal with such an appalling problem, so nothing was done.

Key question

Why were changes made to the French legal system?

The legal system

The Constituent Assembly applied the same principle of uniformity to the legal system as it had done to local government. It abolished many features on 16 August 1790 and imposed a new structure. Among those areas removed were the following:

- The different systems of law in the north and south of the country.
- The different types of law court, the *parlements*, seigneurial and ecclesiastical courts.
- The *lettres de cachet* (see page 33): in place of the old structure a new, uniform system, based on the administrative divisions of the reformed local government, was introduced.

The main features of the new system were:

- In each canton there was to be a justice of the peace, dealing with cases previously handled by seigneurial courts.
- The justice's main task was to persuade the different parties to come to an agreement; he could also judge minor civil cases, such as trespass, without appeal.
- Serious civil cases such as property disputes were dealt with in a district court.
- A criminal court would be located in each department, where trials would be held in public before a jury. The idea of having a jury, like that of having justices of the peace, was taken from English law.
- At the head of the judicial system was a Court of Appeal, whose judges were elected by the department assemblies.
- All judges were elected by active citizens but only those who had been lawyers for five years were eligible. This ensured that all judges were well qualified and accountable.

There were other improvements in the quality of French justice. The **penal code** was made more humane: torture and mutilation were abolished. Anyone arrested had to be brought before a court within 24 hours. The number of capital crimes was vastly reduced. In March 1792 a new and more efficient method of

Key dates
Reorganisation of the judiciary: 16 August 1790

The guillotine was approved as the only method for public execution: March 1792

Key term

Penal code
A list of the laws of France and the punishments for breaking those laws.

execution – the **guillotine** – was approved by the Legislative Assembly. It replaced all other forms used on those condemned to death. This mechanical device with its angular blade would become one of the most feared and lasting images of the Revolution following its first use in April 1792.

The new judicial system was to prove one of the most lasting reforms of the Constituent Assembly. For the first time, justice was made free and equal to all, and was therefore popular. The French system of justice had been one of the most backward, barbarous and corrupt in Europe. In two years it became one of the most enlightened.

The Church

The Constituent Assembly wanted to create a Church that was:

- free from abuses such as absenteeism and plurality
- free from foreign (papal) control – independent of Rome
- democratic
- linked to the new system of local government – primarily the department
- linked more closely to the State in order to strengthen the Revolution.

The deputies were not in the main anti-religious or anti-Catholic and simply wanted to extend to religion the principles they applied elsewhere. They certainly had no intention of interfering with the doctrines of the Church or with its spiritual functions.

In August 1789 the Assembly abolished the tithe, **annates** and pluralism. It also ended the privileges of the Church, such as its right to decide for itself how much tax it would pay. Most parish clergy supported these measures. They also accepted the sale of Church lands, because they would be paid more than they had been under the *ancien régime*.

In February 1790, a decree distinguished between monastic orders which did not work in the community and those which provided education and charity. The former were suppressed, as they made no direct contribution to the common good. The latter were allowed to remain 'for the present', although the taking of religious vows was forbidden.

These changes took place without creating much of a stir among the clergy as a whole. Less popular was the decree in December 1789 giving civil rights to Protestants. These rights were extended to Jews in September 1791.

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy

There was no serious conflict with the Church until the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was approved on 12 July 1790. This measure reformed the Catholic Church in France, and adapted the organisation of the Church to the administrative framework of local government. Dioceses were to coincide with departments. This meant that the number of bishoprics would be reduced from 135 to 83. There would not only be fewer bishops but fewer clergy generally, as all other clerical posts except for parish priests and

Key question

How far did the government want to go in reforming the Church?

Guillotine

A machine introduced in 1792 for decapitating victims in a relatively painless way. It became synonymous with the Terror.

Annates

Payments made by the French Church to the Pope.

Key terms

Key question

How significant was the civil constitution of the clergy on the Revolution and counter-revolution?

Key date

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy became law: 12 July 1790

bishops ceased to exist. The attempt to extend democracy to all aspects of government was also applied to the Church. But there was no intention of ending the Catholic Church's position as the State Church in France.

Some of the key terms of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy were:

- each department would form a single diocese
- there would be no recognition of any bishop appointed by the Pope but not approved by the French State
- all titles and offices, other than those mentioned in the Civil Constitution, were abolished
- all priests and bishops were to be elected to their posts
- all elections were to be by ballot and by absolute majority of those who voted
- priests were to be paid by the State
- there was to be no absenteeism by priests or bishops – no bishop was to be absent from his diocese for more than 15 days consecutively in any year.

Most clergy opposed the principle of election which was unknown in the Church, but even so, the majority (including many bishops) were in favour of finding a way of accepting the Civil Constitution and avoiding a split in the Church. They demanded that the reforms be submitted to a **national synod** of the French Church. This would have made a compromise possible but the Constituent Assembly would not agree to this, as it believed that it would give the Church a privileged position in the State once again, something which had just been abolished.

Key term

National synod

An assembly of representatives of the entire Church.

A constitutional priest taking the civic oath. Study the print carefully. What do you think is the significance of the large storm cloud gathering behind the priest?



The oath of loyalty

As a Church assembly was not allowed to discuss the matter, the clergy waited for the Pope to give his verdict. He delayed coming to a decision, as he was involved in delicate negotiations with the French over the status of **Avignon**. The Assembly grew tired of waiting and in 27 November 1790 decreed that clergy must take an oath to the Constitution. This split the clergy. In the Assembly only two of the 44 bishops and a third of the other clergy took the oath. In France as a whole seven bishops and 55 per cent of the clergy took the oath. When the Pope finally condemned the Civil Constitution in March and April 1791, many clergy who had taken the oath retracted it.

Two Churches

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy had momentous results. It was one of the defining moments of revolution. It effectively destroyed the revolutionary consensus that had existed since 1789. Deputies in the Assembly were shocked when it was rejected by so many clergy and by the Pope.

There were now, in effect, two Catholic Churches in France. One was the constitutional Church, which accepted the Revolution but was rejected by Rome. The other was a **non-juring** Church of 'refractory' priests, approved by the Pope but regarded by patriots as rejecting the Revolution. Nigel Aston, a modern historian, concludes: 'Faced with what was crudely reduced to a stark choice between religion and revolution, half the adult population (and the great majority of women) rejected revolution'.

A major effect of this split was that the counter-revolution, the movement which sought to overturn the Revolution, received mass support for the first time. Before this, it had been supported only by a few royalists and *émigrés*. In the most strongly Catholic areas – the west, north-east and south of the Massif Central – few clergy took the oath. On 27 May 1792 the Legislative Assembly attempted to take a firmer line with those priests who refused to take the oath by passing a measure which enabled their deportation, if 20 citizens were prepared to denounce them.

Many villagers complained that the Assembly was trying to change their religion, especially when refractory priests were expelled. They felt a sense of betrayal which, combined with their hostility to other measures of the Assembly, such as conscription, was to lead to open revolt in 1793 in areas such as the Vendée.

Disaffection with the Revolution, which eventually turned into civil war, was, therefore, one result of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Another was the King's attempt to flee from France in June 1791, precipitating a series of events which was to bring about the downfall of the monarchy (see pages 65–8).

The Constitution of 1791

One of the main aims of the Constituent Assembly had been to draw up a constitution that would replace an absolute monarchy with a constitutional one. Under the new proposals power would pass from the constituent assembly (which would be dissolved)

Avignon

Territory controlled by the Pope in southern France.

Non-juror

Those members of the clergy who refused to take the new oath of allegiance to the Civil Constitution.

Refractory priests

Those who refused to take the oath.

Decree passed

compelling the clergy to take an oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy: 27 November 1790

Any non-juring priests who were denounced by 20 citizens could be deported: 27 May 1792

Louis vetoed the measure on 19 June

Key question

How did the new constitution propose to limit the powers of the Crown?

Legislative assembly

Came into existence in October 1791 and was the second elected Assembly to rule during the Revolution. It differed from the National/Constituent Assembly in that members were directly elected.

Suspensive veto

The right to reject a measure proposed by the assembly.

to a **legislative assembly** of 745 members. These members would be elected every two years and would have significant power.

Much of the Constitution – that the King should have a **suspensive veto** and that there should be one elected assembly – had been worked out in 1789, but the rest was not finally agreed until 14 September 1791. Under the terms of the constitution, the King:

- had the right to appoint his ministers (although they could not be members of the Assembly) and military commanders
- was given a suspensive veto, although this could not be applied to financial or constitutional matters such as new taxes
- was dependent on the Assembly for his foreign policy, as he needed its consent before he could declare war
- agreed that his office, although hereditary, was subordinate to the Assembly, as it passed the laws which the King had to obey. 'In France there is no authority superior to the law ... it is only by means of the law that the King reigns.'

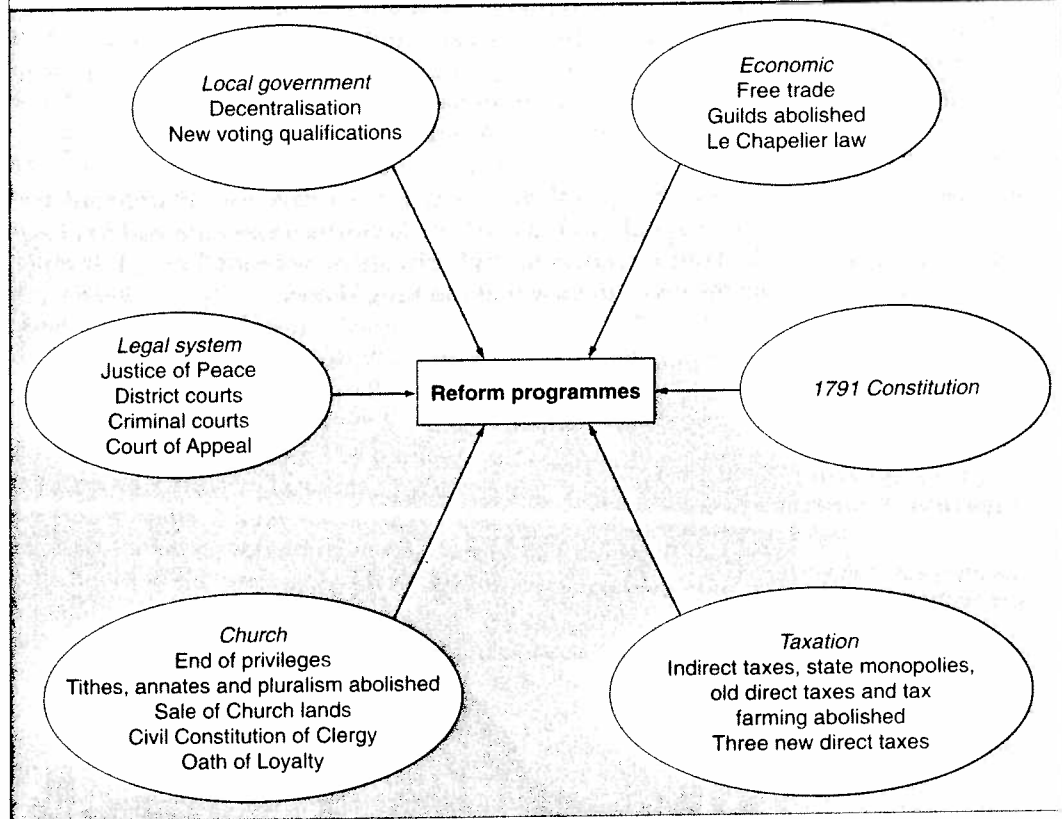
Louis accepts the Constitution:
14 September 1791



Louis XVI facing both ways. In this contemporary cartoon Louis is shown promising both to support and to destroy the constitution.

In September Louis XVI reluctantly accepted the Constitution. Marie Antoinette's attitude was that it was 'so monstrous that it cannot survive for long'. She was determined to overthrow it at the first opportunity.

Summary diagram: The reform programmes of the National Assembly



2 | The Rise of the Jacobin and the Cordeliers

In the absence of political parties, clubs were established to support the popular movement. They were set up soon after the Estates-General met in May 1789. For many ordinary people they provided a stage from which speakers could debate the great issues of the day. The majority of Frenchmen who had never been involved in political life discovered that they provided a crash course in political education. This section will examine two of the most important of these clubs and the growth of popular activity which they helped ferment.

The revolutionary clubs

As there were no political parties, the clubs played an important part in the Revolution. They kept the public informed on the major issues of the day, supported election candidates and acted as pressure groups to influence deputies in the Assembly and to

Key question

What impact did the political clubs have on the course of the Revolution?

promote actions which the deputies seemed reluctant to undertake. In essence, they provided education in political participation.

The Jacobin Club

The Jacobin Club originated in meetings of radical Breton deputies with others of similar views. When the Assembly moved to Paris after the October Days these deputies and their supporters rented a room from the monks of a Jacobin convent in the Rue Saint-Honoré, hence the name by which they are now universally known. Their official title remained the 'Society of the Friends of the Constitution'. At the club, members debated measures that were to come before the Assembly.

The Jacobin Club set a high entrance fee for its members. There were 1200 by July 1790 and they came mainly from the wealthiest sections of society. To begin with they associated themselves with the ideas of the **physiocrats**. They raised no serious objections to the introduction of free trade in grain, or the abolition of guilds in 1791. That they started to move towards accepting a more controlled economy can be explained by the problems posed by war and counter-revolution. Even then these measures were forced on them by their more extreme supporters – the *sans-culottes*.

Jacobin ideology was based upon a combination of Enlightenment thought and revolutionary practice. They came to reject the notion of monarchy. What distinguished the Jacobin from other contemporary clubs was that they were highly political men of action. As the Jacobin moved further to the left in the summer of 1792 they favoured increased **centralisation** of government in order to defend the Republic. The key figure to emerge during this period was Maximilian Robespierre, leader of a minority group of radical Jacobin deputies (see page 112).

A national network of Jacobin clubs soon grew up, all linked to the central club in Paris with which they regularly corresponded. By the end of 1793 there were over 2000 Jacobin clubs across France. It has been estimated that between 1790 and 1799 the movement involved two per cent of the population (about 500,000 people). The significance of the clubs is that they enabled for the first time large numbers of people to become directly involved in the political life of their country.

Key terms

Physiocrats

A group of French intellectuals who believed that land was the only source of wealth and that landowners should therefore pay the bulk of taxes.

Centralisation

Direct central control of the various parts of government, with less power to the regions.

Key question

In what way did the policies of the Cordeliers Club differ from those of the Jacobin?

The Cordeliers Club

The Cordeliers Club, founded in April 1790, was more radical than the Jacobin Club and had no membership fee. It objected to the distinction between 'active' and 'passive' citizens and supported measures which the *sans-culottes* favoured:

- direct democracy where voters choose deputies
- the recall of deputies to account for their actions, if these went against the wishes of the people
- the right of insurrection – rebellion, if a government acted against popular wishes.

It had much support among the working class, although its leaders were bourgeois. Georges Danton and Camille Desmoulins were lawyers. Jacques-René Hébert was an unsuccessful writer who had become a journalist when freedom of the press was allowed. Brissot was also a journalist. But the most notorious writer of all was Marat, a failed doctor turned radical journalist. He hated all those who had enjoyed privileges under the old regime and attacked them violently in his newspaper, *L'Ami du Peuple*. He became the chief spokesman of the popular movement.

During the winter of 1790–1, the example of the Cordeliers Club led to the formation of many 'popular' or 'fraternal' societies, which were soon to be found in every district in Paris and in several provincial towns. In 1791 the Cordeliers Club and the popular societies formed a federation and elected a central committee. The members of the popular societies were drawn mainly from the liberal professions such as teachers and officials, and skilled artisans and shopkeepers. Labourers rarely joined, as they did not have the spare time for politics.

Popular discontent in rural and urban areas

By the start of 1790 many peasants became disillusioned with the Revolution. The sense of anticipation which followed the 'Night of 4 August' quickly diminished once they realised in the spring of 1790 that their feudal dues were not abolished outright but would have to be bought out (see page 40).

A rural revolution began in 1790 in Brittany, in central France and in the south-east. This lasted until 1792 and placed pressure on the Jacobin. Peasants fixed the price of grain, called for the sale of Church land in small lots and attacked châteaux. The rising in the Midi (Languedoc, Provence and the Rhône valley) in 1792 was as important as any in 1789 in size and the extent of the destruction. These risings, and the deteriorating military situation contributed to the most serious crisis of the Revolution. On 10 August 1792 Louis was deposed. Shortly afterwards all feudal and seigneurial dues which could not be justified were abolished. Feudalism was finally abolished without compensation by the Jacobin on 17 July 1793.

The *sans-culottes*

The *sans-culottes* were the workers in the towns. They were not a class, as they included artisans and master craftsmen, who owned their own workshops, as well as wage-earners. They had been responsible for the successful attack on the Bastille and for bringing the royal family back to Paris in the October Days, yet they had received few rewards.

Many of them were 'passive' citizens, who did not have the vote. They suffered greatly from **inflation**. To meet its expenses the government printed more and more *assignats* (paper money), whose value therefore declined. There was a wave of strikes by workers against the falling value of their wages early in 1791. Grain prices rose by up to 50 per cent after a poor harvest in

Key question

Was peasant pressure on the Jacobin in any way successful?

Final abolition of feudalism in France:
17 July 1793

Key date

Key question

How did popular societies seek to take advantage of concerns among workers?

Inflation

A decline in the value of money, which leads to an increase in the price of goods.

Key term

1791. This led to riots, which resulted in shopkeepers' being forced to reduce prices.

The discontent of the urban workers could be used by the popular societies, which linked economic protests to the political demand for a republic whose representatives were directly elected by the people, and by groups in the Assembly who were seeking power. This made the Revolution more radical in ways which the bourgeois leaders of 1789 had neither intended nor desired.

Summary diagram: The rise of the Jacobin and the Cordeliers

	<i>Jacobin</i>	<i>Cordeliers</i>
<i>Key members</i>	Maximilian Robespierre	Georges Danton Camille Desmoulins Jaques-René Hébert Brissot Marat
<i>Supporters</i>	Wealthy radical deputies	Bourgeois and working-class radicals
<i>Key ideas</i>	Centralisation	Direct democracy Right of insurrection

Key question
How did the actions of the King contribute to the emergence of a republican movement?

3 | The Emergence of a Republican Movement

The outstanding politician and orator in the Constituent Assembly was Mirabeau, a nobleman who was elected for the Third Estate in 1789. His willingness to deal directly with the King cost him a great deal of popular support by the time of his death in April 1791. He was fairly typical of a group of moderate politicians who were becoming increasingly influential in the Assembly.

Three of the leading figures were Barnave, Du Port and Lameth, who were known as the triumvirate. Their broad aim was to try and heal the divisions between the aristocracy and bourgeoisie that had emerged during 1789. They feared the extremism of the new clubs and the emergence of an organised working-class movement and wished to bring the Revolution to an end. In order for this to happen there had to be a compromise with the King. This was difficult, as anyone suspected of negotiating with the King was likely to be accused of selling out to the Court. There was also no means of knowing if the King was sincerely prepared to co-operate with the moderates. Louis dashed all their hopes by attempting to flee from Paris.

The flight to Varennes

Louis XVI was a devout man. He deeply regretted his acceptance of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which offended his conscience. He decided to flee from Paris, where he felt restricted

by the Constituent Assembly, to Montmédy in Lorraine, on the border of Luxembourg, and put himself under the protection of the military commander of the area. He hoped that from there, in a position of strength, he would be able to renegotiate with the Constituent Assembly the parts of the Constitution he disliked. Military action would, he hoped, be unnecessary, although the King was aware that there was a danger that his flight might open up divisions and bring about civil war.

Louis left Paris with his family on 20 June 1791. When he reached Varennes, during the night of 21–2 June, he was recognised by the local postmaster, Drouet, and stopped. He was brought back to Paris in an atmosphere of deathly silence. Louis' younger brother, the Comte de Provence, was luckier than the King. He also fled from Paris on 20 June with his wife but he arrived safely in Brussels the next day.

Louis and his family flee Paris and are stopped at Varennes: 20–2 June 1791

Key date

How significant was the flight to Varennes?

The flight to Varennes was one of the key moments of the early phase of the French Revolution. Before leaving, Louis had drawn up a proclamation to the French people which set out in great detail his true feelings regarding the developments that had taken place. Writing in the third person he concluded that: 'The king does not think it would be possible to govern so large and important a kingdom as France by the means established by the National Assembly such as they exist at present'. The significance of the event was:

Key question
Was the flight to Varennes a turning point in the Revolution?

- in the declaration it is obvious that Louis had failed to understand the popularity of the changes which had taken place since 1789
- it became clear that once again (see Civil Constitution of the Clergy, pages 58–60) that the French people would have to make choices that many of them would have preferred to avoid
- Louis in his declaration had emphatically renounced the Revolution. Could he continue to remain as head of state?



'The family of pigs brought back to the sty'. What is the significance of the way the artist has chosen to portray the royal family in this contemporary cartoon?

Republic

A political system which does not have a hereditary head of state and where the supremacy of the people is recognised through mass democracy.

Feuillants

Constitutional monarchists, among them Lafayette, who split from the Jacobin Club following the flight to Varennes.

- the credibility of the new constitution was undermined before it had even been implemented
- support for a **republic** started to grow, while the popularity of the King declined.

On the 24 June, 30,000 people marched to the National Assembly in support of a petition from the Cordeliers Club calling for the King's dismissal from office.

Results of the flight

One immediate result of the flight was that the King lost what remained of his popularity, which had depended on his being seen to support the Revolution. Royal inn signs and street names disappeared all over Paris. His flight persuaded many who had hitherto supported him that he could no longer be trusted. People started to talk openly of replacing the monarchy with a republic.

The deputies in the Assembly acted calmly in this situation. They did not want a republic. They feared that the declaration of a republic would lead to civil war in France and war with European monarchs. Nor did they want to concede victory to the radicals, who wanted more democratic policies. 'Are we going to end the Revolution or are we going to start it again?' one deputy asked the Assembly.

On 16 July the Assembly voted to suspend the King until the constitution was completed. Governing without the head of state would encourage those who favoured republicanism. He would be restored only after he had sworn to observe it. This was going too far for some deputies – 290 abstained from voting as a protest. For others, suspension did not go far enough.

Division among the Jacobins

After the flight to Varennes, radicals were appalled when the King was not dethroned or put on trial. Their anger was directed against the Constituent Assembly, which they claimed no longer represented the people. The Cordeliers took the lead with the popular societies and persuaded the Jacobins to join them in supporting a petition for the King's deposition. This split the Jacobin Club. Those who did not want the King deposed – and this included nearly all the members who were deputies – left the Club.

They set up a new club, the **Feuillants**, which for the moment had control of the Assembly. Robespierre remained as leader of a small group of radical members. It seemed as though the Jacobins had destroyed themselves. However, only 72 of the provincial Jacobin clubs in France defected from the control of the Parisian club, and most of these drifted back in the next few months.

Key question

Why were the events on the Champ de Mars important?

The Champs de Mars massacre

On 17 July 1791, 50,000 people flocked to the Champ de Mars, a huge field in Paris where the Feast of the Federation, celebrating the fall of the Bastille, had been held three days previously. They



The shooting of demonstrators at the Champ de Mars. What would circulation of images such as this hope to achieve?

were there to sign a republican petition on the '**altar of the fatherland**'. This was a political demonstration by the poorer sections of the Paris population. The Commune, under pressure from the Assembly, declared **martial law**. They sent Lafayette with the National Guard to the Champ de Mars, where the Guards fired on the peaceful and unarmed crowd. About 50 people were killed.

This was the first bloody clash between different groups in the Third Estate, and it was greeted with pleasure in the Assembly. Messages of support for the Assembly poured in from the provinces. Martial law remained in force for a month, during which time some popular leaders were arrested. Others, such as Hébert, Marat and Danton, fled or went into hiding. The moderates had won – it took nearly a year for the popular movement to recover – and could now work out a compromise with the King without facing mob violence. As far as the extremists were concerned only the overthrow of the monarchy would satisfy their demands.

The Feuillants were more determined than ever to make an agreement with the King. Although they did not trust him and had lost popular support, for the moment they controlled Paris and the Assembly. Their long-term success however depended on the co-operation of Louis, and this was far from certain.

The Legislative Assembly

The acceptance of the Constitution by the King on 13 September 1791 marked the end of the Constituent Assembly. Its final meeting was on 30 September. On 1 October the first meeting of the new Legislative Assembly was held. But by now suspicion and hatred amongst the deputies had replaced the optimism of 1789. The mood among the deputies in the new Legislative Assembly was far from co-operative. There were a number of reasons why this change had come about:

The National Guard opens fire on a crowd killing about 50 people: 17 July 1791

'Altar of the fatherland'

A large memorial to commemorate the Revolution.

Martial law

When there is severe rioting or public disorder, the authorities can declare martial law which would impose restrictions on movement and may suspend civil liberties.

Key question

What effect did the lack of trust between politicians and the King have on the Legislative Assembly?

Key date

Key terms

Key terms

Self-denying ordinance

Approved by the Constituent

Assembly to ensure that none of its members could belong to the new assembly.

Left

Those seated on the left of the speaker favouring extreme policies such as removing the King and having a republic.

Right

Those seated on the right of the speaker and supporting a limited monarchy.

Centre

Those who sat facing the speaker favouring neither left nor right.

Girondins

A small group of deputies from the Gironde and their associates – notably Brissot.

Parlementaire

Judges who held hereditary positions on one of the 13 *parlements*.

- The King's reluctance to accept measures he disliked.
- Suspicions regarding the King's commitment to the Revolution as revealed by the flight to Varennes.
- The fear of counter-revolutionary plots.

To prevent his political opponents in the Constituent Assembly from dominating the next Assembly, Robespierre proposed a **self-denying ordinance**. This was passed and stated that no member of the Constituent Assembly, including Robespierre, could sit in the next Legislative Assembly.

In the elections for the new Legislative Assembly (29 August to 5 September), under a quarter of the 'active' citizens voted. The Assembly of 745 members which was elected was almost wholly bourgeois. In the semicircular meeting chamber the seating arrangement in front of the speaker gave rise to new political labels – **left**, **right** and **centre**. There were few nobles, most of whom had retired to their estates and kept themselves to themselves, hoping for better times. Only 23 clergy were elected. There were no peasants or artisans, and few businessmen. At the opening of the Legislative Assembly, it was possible to identify three broad groups of deputies:

1. The Left – 136 deputies most of whom were members of the Jacobin Club. The most prominent were a small group of deputies from the Gironde department, known as the **Girondins**.
2. The Right – 264 deputies who were members of the Feuillant Club and considered the Revolution to be over.
3. The Centre – 345 deputies making up the largest group who were unattached.

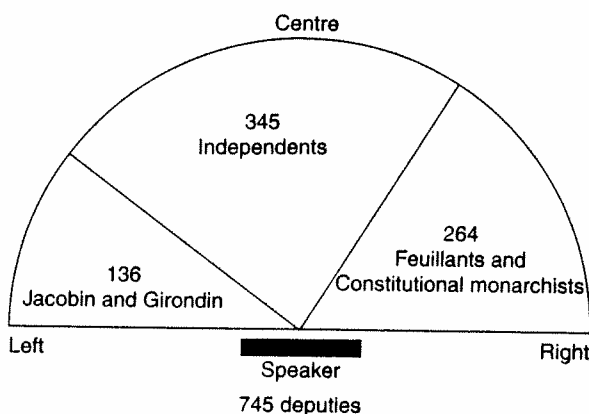


Figure 3.2: Main political groups in the Legislative Assembly, 1 October 1791 to 20 September 1792

Key question

What impact did the flight to Varennes have on the *émigrés*?

The growth of the counter-revolution

From the very start the deputies were worried by the non-juring clergy and by the *émigrés*, whose numbers had increased greatly since the flight to Varennes. Nearly all the *ancien régime* bishops and many of the great court and *parlementaire* families had

emigrated to Austria and the small German states along the river Rhine. What alarmed the Assembly most was the desertion of army officers. By early 1791, 1200 noble officers had joined the *émigrés*, though a large majority of pre-Revolution officers remained at their posts. All this changed after Varennes.

By the end of 1791, about 6000 had emigrated, 60 per cent of all officers. The Assembly passed two laws in November. One declared that all non-jurors were suspects. The other said that all *émigrés* who did not return to France by 1 January 1792 would forfeit their property and be regarded as traitors. When the King vetoed these laws his unpopularity increased. He appeared to be undermining the Revolution.

Conclusion

This chapter has largely focused on the significant reforms passed by the Assembly which altered so many of France's institutions. It has also dealt with the increasing politicisation of many sections of society as the Revolution took hold in the country. The changes were certainly not to everyone's liking as the growth of the counter-revolution suggests. At the centre of all these changes was the King. His distaste for what was happening within France and to his authority became evident during his attempt to flee the country. Whatever assurances he might give to the contrary, he was clearly ill at ease in the role of a constitutional monarch. His opponents for their part were uncomfortable with him, as the growth of republicanism would indicate. The next chapter will examine why and how Louis was overthrown.

4 | The Key Debate

As the First Estate the Catholic Church during the *ancien régime* was the most important of the Estates of the Realm. The decision to reform it in incremental stages was certainly one of the boldest of the policies taken by the Constituent and National Assemblies. A central theme which scholars address is:

Why was the Catholic Church reformed and did this decision have any significance on the course of the Revolution?

Jacques Solé

Jacques Solé believes that the Catholic Church on the eve of the Revolution was in a relatively healthy state and that its priests and bishops were good administrators and effective clerics. According to Solé the reform of the Church, undertaken by the Constituent Assembly, was the result of a misunderstanding. This misunderstanding arose because the Constituent Assembly, impressed by the revolutionary enthusiasm of the lower clergy who sat in it, failed to understand that the Church was deeply unified in 1789. These clerical deputies had many grievances against the Church and drove the reform process for their own ends.

John McManners

John McManners points out that on the eve of the Revolution the Catholic Church was providing an enormous amount of charity, poor relief and education along with its spiritual role. However the unity of the Church was more apparent than real. Like Solé he noted that within the Church many of its priests were vocal in asking for an improvement in their situation. Their complaints influenced clerical deputies, who in turn promoted and supported reform of the Church, culminating in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. McManners considers however that this was the point when the Revolution 'went wrong'.

D.M.G. Sutherland

D.M.G. Sutherland identified the Civil Constitution of the Clergy as one of the great crises of the Revolution. The decision to reform the Catholic Church was notable for the boost it gave to the counter-revolution, because it provided it with a popular base. The large numbers of ordinary peasants in various parts of rural France were mobilised by refractory priests to oppose the Revolution. Showing loyalty to the refractories was one way of demonstrating hostility to the Revolution, while making the religious settlement unworkable in many areas of the country.

Nigel Aston

Nigel Aston broadly supports McManners' view that the Church on the eve of the Revolution was facing severe internal stresses, resulting from a top-heavy organisation which was crushing the ordinary parish clergy. This led large numbers of ordinary clergy to align themselves with the progressive forces directing the Revolution in 1789. Their support however was largely undermined by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. This, according to Aston, led to a schism within the Church which helped pave the way for a republic that actively sponsored alternative beliefs to Christianity – Robespierre's Cult of the Supreme Being.

Some key books in the debate

Nigel Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France 1789–1804* (Macmillan, 2000).

John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (SPCK, 1969).

Jacques Solé, *Questions of the French Revolution* (Pantheon, 1989).

D.M.G. Sutherland, *France 1789–1815 Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Fontana, 1985).
